

For and Against Humanity: Gender Nihilism, Negative Humanity, and Heterosexuality as a Form of Life

All of us have an abstract idea of what being "human" means, even if what we mean when we say "human" is still potential and virtual, has not yet been actualized. For indeed, for all its pretension to being universal what has been until now considered as "human" in our Western philosophy concerns only a small fringe of people: white men, proprietors of the means of production, along with the philosophers who theorized their point of view as the only and exclusively possible one.

-Monique Wittig "Homo Sum"¹

Introduction

I begin this piece in the spirit of friendly critique, addressed towards the "cornerstone which holds gender nihilist critique together,"² antihumanism. This is not because I wish to tear down this analysis, but because I wish to strengthen it, to patch the cracks I can see in this cornerstone with mortar. I consider gender nihilism as having been vitally necessary as an opening up of a space of critique too long abandoned and neglected by gender insurrectionaries and as a critique of ideas too long accepted by the "trans community" at large. The critique I put forward advances itself from the materialist analysis of Wittig among others, and it is this analysis that offers another way to see the relation of the human to gender nihilism. This critique sees the human as a position that can be claimed and asserted as our own in the process of self-abolishment of humanity. As oppressed peoples, we must assert ourselves as general, as the potential and the limit or even beyond the limit, of humanity, and not leave this position for our class enemies, for those who by their very existence ensure our continued negation. We must and can open up a space of many humanities that ensures our fullest life as free humans. This is not a positive project, but a project of abolition that opens up freedom as a space for the overcoming of all limits, including humanity in the course of the struggle.

¹ Wittig, Monique. "Homo Sum." *Feminist Issues* 10, no. 1 (1990): 3-11.

² Anonymous. "Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto." *Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto*. July 09, 2015. Accessed January 21, 2016. <https://libcom.org/library/gender-nihilism-anti-manifesto>.

Humanity and its Position

The basis of the antihumanism of gender nihilism is a recognition the discursive construction of the subject, by power, which is to say that:

The self, the subject is a product of power. The “I” in “I am a man” or “I am a woman” is not an “I” which transcends those statements. Those statements do not reveal a truth about the “I,” rather they constitute the “I.” Man and Woman do not exist as labels for certain metaphysical or essential categories of being, they are rather discursive, social, and linguistic symbols which are historically contingent.³

The problem with this understanding as the basis of an antihumanism lies in the fact that the historical contingencies that create these “discursive, social, and linguistic symbols” are never defined or dealt with⁴. These contingencies are of prime importance, and it is here that I wish to intervene with the materialist analysis advanced by Wittig, for it is also here that the material world intervenes into the discursivity of gender nihilism antihumanism. It is not enough to say that the subject is discursively constructed, one must say by what forces. To leave by the wayside the historical contingencies of our current situation, the material aspects, is to abandon any potential of a thread to follow out of the labyrinth we are imprisoned in.

The historical contingency that establishes the gendered-subject is heterosexuality as a form of life, which is to say “the massive affirmation of heterosexuality as a must-be.”⁵ Or put another way, dialectically, heterosexuality as a form of life counterposes itself against us⁶ and

³ Anonymous. "Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto." *Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto*. July 09, 2015. Accessed January 21, 2016. <https://libcom.org/library/gender-nihilism-anti-manifesto>.

⁴ They are dealt with in more detail in the author's corrections, which address gender as a colonial formation, but it still does not address this formation as rooted in economies of heterosexuality.

See: <http://cisyphus.tumblr.com/post/132893614849/addendum>

⁵ Wittig, Monique. "The Straight Mind." *Feminist Issues* 1, no. 1 (1980): 103-11.

⁶ I use this in a deliberately broad way to not essentialize the insurrection against heterosexuality.

negates the forms of life we provisionally create. We find ourselves in this negative position. The gender nihilist and the liberal feminist fall victim to the same trap, that of heterosexuality as a political trap and suffocation of discourse⁷. When the manifesto claims that “physical sex...is grounded in discursive groupings, given an authority through medicine,”⁸ it ignores that the groupings of sex are not discursive, but above all are ideological, which is to say concurrent and only existent within a material superstructure of exploitation of labor, i.e. within heterosexuality.

We propose instead that the category of sex is ideologically founded upon a prior instantiation of gender as a political category, as a category of oppression. While this oppression operates through discourse, its basis is left aside in the critique the manifesto presents. To formulate a critique of gender without including one of heterosexuality, the material system of gender, is to accept heterosexuality as outside of critique, and to accept its modes of desire over the antithesis of them in ourselves, and finally is to leave aside all hope of a synthesis past heterosexuality. This absence of heterosexuality in gender nihilist critique can be remedied by a dialectical analysis that reveals the actual ways in which heterosexuality confronts and alienates us.

The Dialectics of Gender Nihilism:

Gender nihilism assumes a discursively created subject that exists within matrices of power. While this is true, it ignores the dialectical struggle between heterosexuality and the classes it oppresses (these are myriad) that creates the relations of discursive power that construct

⁷ I do not mean to insinuate anything about the particular orientations of the authors of the manifesto, nor about liberal feminists in general. Rather this expresses an ideological view of heterosexuality, and whether it slips unquestioned and unchallenged into a work.

⁸ Anonymous. "Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto." *Gender Nihilism: An Anti-Manifesto*. July 09, 2015. Accessed January 21, 2016. <https://libcom.org/library/gender-nihilism-anti-manifesto>.

the subject. Wittig takes dialectics as operating “on a series of oppositions that basically have a metaphysical connotation: Being or non-Being.” The manifesto assumes a position where when a trans woman speaks “the transgressive statement of ‘We are women’” they deny “the category power has imposed onto [their] bodies,” but still “speak the language of gender. We reference an idea of “woman” which does not exist within us as a stable truth, but references the discourses by which we are constituted.” However, this position ignores that to claim womanhood is not to claim (nor construct) a subject position within a set of matrices, but rather it is to claim a non-position, to become a non-entity.

To be a woman is to become a negation in oneself, the non-being Wittig speaks of is the position all those who are not men, white, straight, etc are placed within, in various interlocking ways. From this position, our struggle becomes a purely negative humanism. The real answer to negation is not to embrace it wholeheartedly, but to attack what alienates you. If this is humanity, attacking the human consists not in confirming what society tells us is already true, but in overcoming it by claiming our negation and the positive location of humanity as both our own. While we advance from a place of negativity, our critique can use humanity as a tool, as a war-machine, a trojan horse which lets us into the walled city.

Heterosexuality as a Form of Life

Heterosexuality as a form of life consists of two main parts. Firstly, it consists of the creation of a specific desiring form that consists of a total symbolic order, a structure of interactions. Foucault identifies this succinctly as why two men cannot be together, that they face each other without “terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward each other.” This totalizing form of the symbolic

order, which we also propose extends to all the negationary categories we find ourselves in, coheres with the foundation of sex, that is to say with the founding of the sexed material body by the social grouping of gender under (or within) heterosexuality. . Heterosexuality, to preserve itself as the economic arrangement that structures the majority of daily life, necessarily must silence all possible alternatives. Heterosexuality must construct itself as universal - this goes hand in hand with the historical imposition of heterosexual gaze onto indigenous communities and the consequent erasure and (re/op)pression of those persons within indigenous communities who could not or would not be subsumed into a heterosexual order, which is at the same time congruent with colonialism. - so that attack does not appear possible.

This universality of course, involves an impoverishment of speech for all that are not heterosexual. This is “rectified” by the creation of specialists - interpreters able to relay the speech of those cast out of the heterosexual family. These are the psychiatrists, therapists, doctors, anthropologists, sociologists or even laws that assert that they can explain our feelings and thoughts . But this is not to explain them as they are, but always to explain them through heterosexuality. Despite the fact that we no longer use the term “invert,” homosexuality is still thought of as a mere inversion of heterosexuality, with the apparatuses of desire, sex, etc operating in the same manner in each of the two. This is just as true for transsexuality, which is thought of as a mere displaced cissexuality with the feeling of being a gender being the same, and with womanhood, which is assumed as the inverse of manhood, many times down to the physical level. Negation is constituted as reversal under heterosexuality, in order to disguise the true relations of heterosexuality. We see this in same-sex marriage laws, which interpret our gay desires in ways analogous to straight marriage, in discourse around “autogynephilia,” which

simultaneously reinscribes heterosexuality and cissexuality, or the fact that “acceptance,” language right out of the psychiatrist’s office, is how the straight world wishes to deal with us. The discourses of heterosexuality, which comes from the material division of individuals into social classes and the subsequent exploitation of one class by another, silences us as the anything-but-strights. We must be straight or we must not be⁹.

The *dispositif* of heterosexuality is secondly a specific way of managing labor, always towards the end of reproductive futurism. Reproductive futurism is not an essentialist concept, dependent on biology. Rather, it is the continual reinvention and reinscription of capitalist/colonial society through social (economic) relations. Baedan identifies this, and I agree, as the way that even a non reproductive queerness can become “the *avant-garde* of marketplaces and the dynamic lifeblood of the advanced postmodern economy.” Heterosexuality uses the positive and negative poles it establishes to create energy from their friction, that it channels back into itself. Men hate women and exist in a social conflict separate from the social/economic conflict that is gender (anyone who has been around a group of men when they aren’t around visible women will see how quickly the veneer of civil domination slips) yet this has only been capable of reincorporating productive labor back into heterosexuality. For all the fact that marriage has ruptured more than ever, that divorce is as high as it is, heterosexuality has survived, because it is able to channel this fracture inside itself into, paradoxically, new and more resilient forms. Twenty years from now marriage will be dead, the family will be dead and heterosexuality will survive as the world system unless we force a rupture.

Praxis

⁹ Incidentally, this is the same politics that says that a genderless society will make bodily transition obsolete. It forecloses a possibility of moving beyond the body as a heterosexual construct. Bodies cease to exist as bodies when they cease to be places of labor and become places of joy.

The practical question of how one destroys the present by claiming universal humanity from a place of negation is a difficult one. A practical path is one informed by a transposition of immediate communist measures.¹⁰ One aspect of Wittig's project was the usage of Marxian ideas in a context unforeseen in their development. Wittig did this with class struggle, and I propose to do this with an understanding of immediate communist measures, to use them for nihilist ends against gender.

I understand and use immediate communist measures as form of struggle where instead of waiting for the entire class to organize *as a class*¹¹ before attempting to create communism or a communist revolutionary moment, communism is instituted in the immediacy of a series of overlapping, opaque communes and insurrections that make communism a provisional reality in the immediate context one finds oneself in. I see this understanding as having great use for a practice of gender nihilism, because I understand this as a negative struggle. We must build a space "against reality" where we are "our own base." (TCI) The goal of our movement must be to "free up the most time for the most people." (TCI) With gender this can only manifest as the real attack on an existence wholly defined by the labor we do, including on our own self understanding. We perform the labor of heterosexuality, of sex-gender at every moment; we might only escape it when we sleep. We perform the labor of self-doubt, beauty, social reproduction, the pressure release valve and scapegoat, the labor of looking over our shoulder and the labor of fears and anxiety, of depression. Spaces free from this are possible. A trans woman used her nursing skills to perform cheap orchiectomies in a barn, we share hormones and dosing, plan how to lie and assert ourselves over doctors. We organize our own spaces of

¹⁰ I understand this term is from Endnotes, but I use it in a different sense.

¹¹ Incidentally, this seems to me to be the conception of struggle put forward by the vulgar materialists within the radical feminist milieu.

housing, sharing them and offering them to others - these are places to begin but not to end. We must block all flows, use structures in ways they weren't intended. We must be opaque and in the shadows, gathering our strength even as we make a world without gender a reality in the moment.

Conclusion

We have ended in a paradoxical, aporetic space, where we must engage in contradiction to continue. This is merely our adoption as politics, as life, of the space we are already in and the usage of the space we find ourselves within in ways that can't be controlled. An oppression that depends on paradox demands a politics that depends on aporia. It is only from a provisional and shifting position that we can begin a struggle that is opaque, transitory, and instantiated and destroyed as often as it needs to be until we are all free. Moving thru humanity to a place beyond it is crucial in this struggle. If we distrust humanity it is from the experience of being cast out, but that does not mean we need to adopt this position as our place to begin and end. It is a place to begin, but it a place to begin an attack. If the destruction of humanity is our goal, it is only us as the other that can accomplish it, because it is only when the other collapses the distinction between itself and the original that all contradictions become null. Antihumanism should be our goal but not our place of departure, except as location socially. Adopting the location we are in is a strategic move, and not one of ethics. I propose to leave you with this image: the monster is outside of the town, and it knows this. It too, wishes for the warmth of companionship and of a house and food. This scene is was for me the most poignant image of *Frankenstein*. It must trek from where it is and must recognize why it was there. Frankenstein and his monster ended up in

the far north on the ice. We wish to get ourselves to this point, and then we wish to stamp on the ice, until it breaks. It is the point of breaking through into an unknown that we must reach.

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